

Yesterday in STAMPS: “Barbed Wire” Stamps

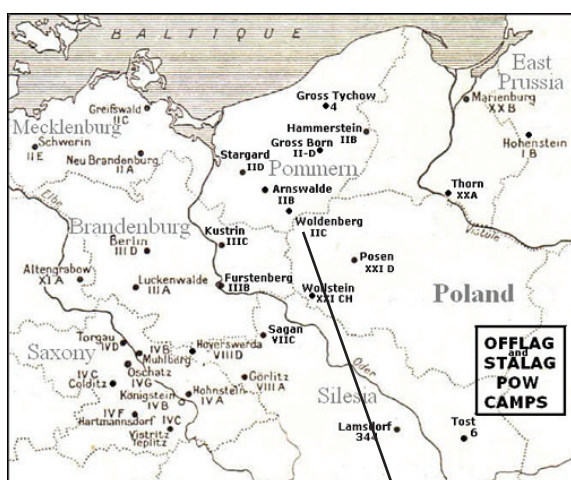
by T. Skowronski

(From STAMPS Magazine, February 15, 1969, with images added)

(Editor's Note: The author of this article, a former Polish Army officer, was a prisoner at the Woldenberg Camp. In addition to this article, this month's Stamp News Online display on Scout stamps includes coverage of the Warsaw POW Scout Mail Service.)

The forming of a postal system in the officers war prisoner camp in Dobiegniew, Woldenberg, came about because of two factors. First, the necessity of easing the problem of keeping contact among themselves in the camp; and secondly the psychological effect of making life more pleasant for the prisoners, whose lives had been so different before the war. The postage stamp was a means of expression, and an active postal system enabled us to take our minds off our imprisonment to some extent.

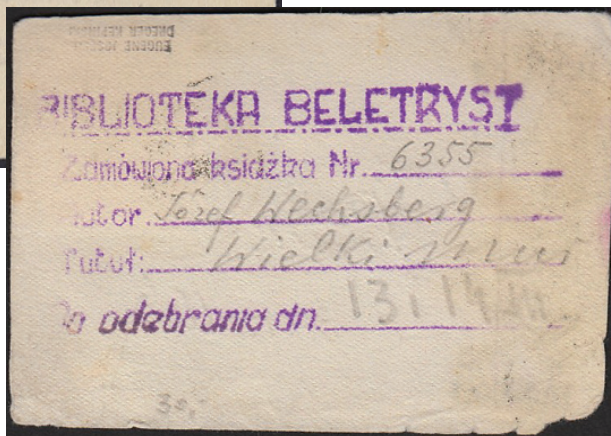
Our camp was the largest one for Polish officers in Germany, occupying about sixty-two acres of land. There were about 7,000 soldiers in the camp, of which about 6,000 were officers. In this area there were fifty barracks, which included living quarters, libraries (page 2), a pharmacy, chancery, lecture halls, a gymnasium, a book bindery, and other halls in which various groups of men could meet. Community life was well developed, and the exchange of cultural knowledge by means of correspondence within



Map showing the POW camps, including the Woldenberg Officers Camp



Post card on thin paper, franked with 5gr imperf, tied by Woldenberg c.d.s. "Biblioteka" marking on back indicates it could be a library card. (See also p. 8)



the camp was on an especially high plane.

The small area for so large a population, and the physical reminders

of our misfortune, a triple series of barbed wire fence towers with searchlights and machine guns mounted on them, and numberless sentries armed with guns and grenades, were all a strain on our mental attitudes. There was not a spot in the camp where one could escape seeing these symbols of lost freedom. To defend ourselves against a psychic breakdown we wanted to forget barbed wire, learn not to see it, pretend we were leading a normal life. By force of will we achieved this, at least to a degree, and determination also was responsible for our activating a postal system as well as building the roots of a camp community.

Also favoring our aims was the fact that in the camp there was a net of barracks postal officials for the distribution of letters coming from outside the camp, notifying officers of receipt of parcels, and who could in other ways perform the functions of a postal agency.

We established a Widow and Orphan Fund (FWS), which handled the collection and distribution of money to widows and children of deceased and missing soldiers of the Polish Army. A camp-elected Administration for the Fund petitioned the commanding officer of the camp for permission to organize a temporary postal system for the



1942 10f blue and 10f red Widow and Orphan tied to small card by Woldenberg April 6, 1942 Easter Mail cancel. 150 blue and 200 red stamps were issued.

camp and from the postal system. On the individual stamps can be seen in small faint letters the initials "FWS." The first issue of stamps carried the name "Widow Issue." This issue was entirely sold out in a few days, with a delivery of about 800 pieces of mail. (See also page 8.)

This resulted in the commanding officer of the camp permitting the inauguration of a permanent postal system in his decision of April 10, 1942. A postal commission was formed, which organized and activated the postal system. Its sphere of responsibility included the printing of the stamps, establishing of postal rates, publishing the necessary information and publicizing the contest to select the designs for the stamps, postal cards, and cancellations. Permanent postal activity in the camp began on May 7, 1942. All the cultural and educational organizations, professional groups, camp organs, etc., benefitted from the postal services, as well as the officers as a whole with their personal correspondence. Postal activity was greatest in the holiday periods.

In the middle of November 1942 the "FWS" was dissolved by the German authorities, and the whole postal organization was put into the hands of the Postal Commission. From the very beginning the work of the Postal

period of the Easter holidays.

The funds were received not only from monthly contributions and good will donations, but from income derived from various shows which were performed in the



*Widow issue
10f green*

Commission was very difficult. At the time it was instituted there was an extreme paper shortage as well as of printing inks, and most difficult was the fact that those entrusted with the manufacturing of the stamps had no experience at all, although were ambitious enough and well-intentioned. Because of the paper shortage, the first issue was printed on paper collected in a camp paper drive, and the necessary oils for coloring were donated by artists and painters.



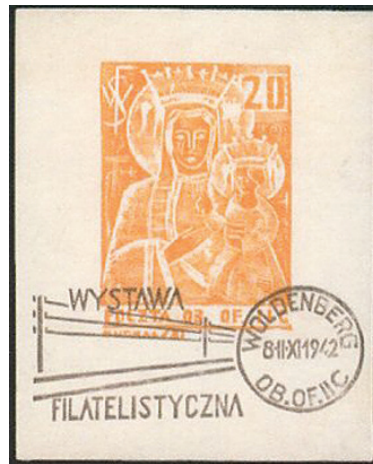
The banner of the Order of Virtuti Militari, issued May 7, 1942. See also page 9.

Later on regular printing inks were secured, and the following issues were printed with them. One was printed on the margins of German newspapers. One known as the "Torch Issue" has one side perforated: part of this issue was printed on blotting paper. The issue known as "Virtuti Militari" was printed similarly but on different paper. In the end,

thanks to the assistance of the International Red Cross and the Y.M.C.A., one type of paper was used, and the quantity printed was increased.

The stamps were printed on individual sheets of paper which were then trimmed to the right size. Beginning with the "Madona Swarzewska" issue, the paper was trimmed to size first and then the design was printed on it. The "Assistance Issue" was printed on January 27, 1944, from a plate of four stamp designs on sheets of white paper.

All plates were handmade, and beginning with June 10, 1942, a primitive hand-operated press, constructed in the camp, was used. All stamps were in one color with the exception of the November 11, 1943 issue for the 25th



1942 20f orange "Madona Swarzewska" souvenir sheet with Nov. 18, 1942, philatelic exhibition commemorative cancel

anniversary of independence, which was printed from two separate plates. One plate applied a red bronze color, and the other a gray-green. [Correction: the Red Cross issue, shown here, also was a two-color printing, and may actually be the issue to which the author was referring. JFD.]



The subjects of the stamps represented the longings, hopes, and other normal emotions of mankind, such as love of fellowmen, pity, mercy, etc. History and famous personalities found

their place. There were YMCA and Red Cross issues, historical events, and such men as Paderewski, Gen. Sikorski, Copernicus, and any others.



5f Madonna and Child



Olympic Runner



Chodkiewicz

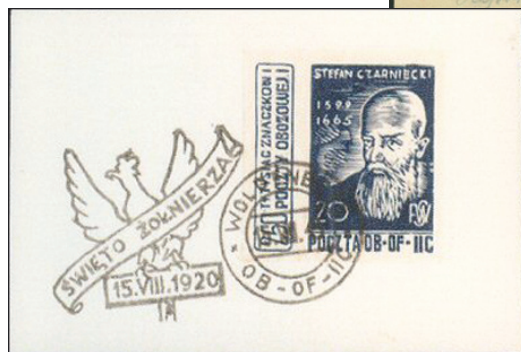
There was a Madonna issue, and a Sports issue, and independence anniversary issues. On

May 18, 1942 postal cards were introduced; on Sept. 11, 1942, postage-due stamps (page 6); and on April 1, 1945, an Official stamp appeared. There were also “regular” issues. The “Hetman” [Polish Army leaders] issue showed Zamoyski, Zolkiewski, Chodkiewicz, and Czarniecki. The battles of Raclawice and Zielence were commemorated, and there was a special issue devoted to “Virtuti Militari.” On the occasion of printing 250,000 stamps of the “Hetman” issue, one-thousand of the Ste-

fan Czarniecki stamps were imprinted with an additional inscription on the left wide



1943 10f Dark Green Postage Due tied to small card by "Woldenberg 28.11.43" c.d.s.



1943 20f dark blue Stefan Czarniecki issue with tab (see page 8), tied to small card by "Woldenberg 15 VII 43" commemorative cancel.

margin "250,000 War Prisoner Camp Postage Stamps."

On the anniversary of the shooting by Germany

of unarmed Polish prisoners a 10 fen green stamp of the "Torch" issue on white paper was overprinted in red "5, 2, 43." This stamp was the only one which did not get into circulation at Dobiegniew (Woldenberg), and was not used or cancelled. (See page 10.)



On January 30, 1945, a large part of the camp was liberated by the Red Army and the Polish Army. About 25 percent of the former prisoners were transported to the West, and it is likely that this stamp may have been cancelled at other prison camps.

Three types of rubber cancellers were used at the camp. On December 24, 1942, a metal canceller with different numerals was adopted. On holidays, exhibition days, and anniversaries special rubber cancellations were applied.

Before closing this account we should mention that not only were ordinary letters and cards accepted for delivery, but also registered and express mail (see page 7); the express mail was delivered immediately, while ordinary and registered mail were delivered twice daily.

1944 Registered Express cover franked by four singles of the 10f dark green Oak Leaf, three of the 20f dark blue Oak Leaf and two 35f dark red Eagle, tied by "Woldenberg 26.IX.44" c.d.s.

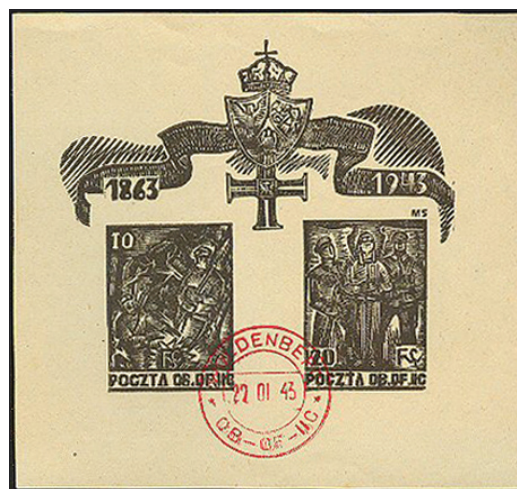


Other Woldenberg Issues:

Three 1944 semi-postal imperforate issues of Woldenberg, memorializing the loss of Poland's Eastern Territories to the Soviet Union, affixed to a small sheet and tied by Woldenberg OF OB IIC slogan cancel



1943 January Uprising 80th Anniversary souvenir sheet of two with red "Woldenberg 22.01.43" (Jan. 22) c.d.s.



The Sobus Collection of the Polish POW Camp Post

What I present here is only a tiny selection from an exhibit at <http://www.polonus.org/home.php>, which is within the website of the Polonus Philatelic Society. Even if you do not collect anything related to this subject, this 160-page exhibit will leave you impressed with the courage and resourcefulness of the prisoners in this camp. JFD.

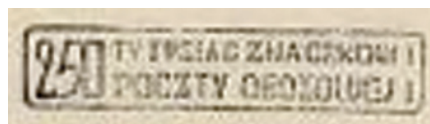


Front and back of the first Easter mail. Apropos the title of this STAMPS article, the design of the card symbolizes the tearing apart of the barbed wire surrounding the camp.



The first official postal card, issued May 18, 1942, this example being mailed June 15, 1942, with a 5f Virtuti Militari stamp also affixed.

The tab from a Hetman issue stamp (page 6), which translates to “250,000 War Prisoner Camp Postage Stamps.”



Virtuti Militari souvenir sheet with the three different designs used on the stamps, issued June 18, 1942 and cancelled by the one-day cancel commemorating the Battle of Zieleńce when the order was founded in 1792.



Official mailing of August 24, 1944, using the Official stamp that was issued April 1, 1943.



Within the camp there were various circles, including a philatelic circle, whose members, not surprisingly, were very active within the postal service. The circle's identification card is seen here, with the circle's cancel in red.



